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ON THE NOTION OF GOD AND THE PRINCIPLE OF RELATIVITY.*

I do not propose to take up again, after so many famous writers, the development, or criticism of the notion of God. Still, we generally find this idea coupled with a logical and psychological question about which I wish to present a few remarks.

It seems indeed as though the traditional evidence concerning the notion of a personal God, ruling over the external world, had lost favor with philosophers, if not with theologians. The reason for this is easy to state. Whether this evidence is called cosmological or ontological; whether it is founded on analogy or the necessity of universal concepts; on contingency of things or inequality of natures; whether it appeals to the idea of being or the idea of good, of moral perfection; to the principle of contradiction or to the principle of causality, one and the same psychological situation is found under all the discussion. In such a debate we only give expression to what is already present in our thought; we oppose the positive term of a series to its corresponding negative term, and give actual existence to relations conceived in our minds.

It is a fact of common experience that the knowledge we have of ourselves implies a change in our states of consciousness. It is the same with the perception of self as of the motion of an external object: we perceive and determine motion only by the changes of position of the object with relation to bodies at rest or of a different velocity. That is why our concepts always imply the idea of a "relation" and are framed in what may be called contradictions.

We know that there are several kinds of these contradictions which do not always exactly correspond. Affirmation and negation, existence and non-existence, for instance, are not to be compared in every particular with other contrasts, such as absolute and contingent, infinite and finite, unity and multiplicity. The former concern existence which may be only affirmed or denied; the latter concern modes of existence, which are rendered comprehensible by their very opposition and do not at all exclude each other in the way in which non-existence excludes existence, or negation, affirmation. But they always practically imply a relation between opposite terms, whether these terms express pure concepts, either logical or numerical, or states of feeling, or moral ideas, as in the case of con-

* Translated from the French by Amélie Sérafon.

trasts of a different order, such as pleasure and pain, desire and aversion, good and evil.

These contrasts, these antitheses indicate mere attitudes of mind; they represent our way of feeling and understanding; they are the forms of our affective and mental life, the conditions by means of which we become conscious of our relations with the external world, and connect the moments of our own personality. In this sense it is clear that everything is relative, that neither we ourselves exist, nor anything exists for us except by comparison with other existences. Thus the operations of our intelligence can be reduced to a faculty of forming series, the supposed last terms of which are to us a kind of concept-limit, not representable in themselves, and made intelligible only by the relations they symbolize.

As soon as we externalize these conditions of consciousness and sensibility, we create artificial contradictions. In fact, we cannot eradicate from our conception of things the imprint of our own mind, nor doubt the realities to which our own logic adapts itself. Neither can we, except by means of hypothesis, liken the capacity of our mind to the capacity of the universe, and we can only imagine, without ever attaining, a condition in which the consciousness of the subject might be the complete and perfect expression of the object.

Herein we find the defect of any kind of evidence that relates to metaphysics. To those who will admit no other source of knowledge than experience, theologians raise the objection that reason is a no less valuable source of knowledge. Still, reason is controlled by experience, and is entirely dependent on conditions of experience. We might even say, and it has been said before, that all knowledge is but sensation transformed or reflected.

Limited as it is by the law of relativity, our reason could never know God except in the form of a relation, which according to the expression of a neo-criticist, might be called "relation *par excellence*"; there is also the old argument of the schools, that it is not lawful to pass from the concept of existence to absolute, real existence. No doubt, great thinkers like St. Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, and Descartes, recognized the difficulties of such a subject. They found that a too close investigation of grounds of belief would have resulted in pantheism, that is to say, in the notion of God in nature and ruling it from within. For all this evidence implied after all the oneness of God and the world, since it seemed irrational to designate degrees or distinctions in the absolute.

Renouvier, who claimed to be a disciple of Descartes and Kant, undertook the task of opposing modern doctrines, whether naively dogmatic or thoroughly skeptical, and which, according to him, result either in a vague pantheism or discreet atheism, and according to which the individual and personality are nothing in the world but transitory phenomena, and the universe the outcome of a substance unknown to itself, and manifested in the infinity of time and space. God and the soul (which to him were one and the same idea) remained the center of his own particular doctrine. But in order to prove their existence and demonstrate the thesis of a providential or natural finality, he was obliged first to refute the realistic doctrine of the absolute substance, of that infinite "thing" without beginning or end, the development of which might be the universe; hence, to refute the doctrine of universal determinism. The principle of contradiction in which he takes refuge, would preclude attributing reality to any object which might be conceived as a composite of modes, qualities, parts, or distinct moments, of infinite and interminable number though actually acquired and imparted in all its unities. Moreover it would prevent accepting the essential predetermination of the future, for otherwise it would have to be admitted that every phenomenon occurring at present is the predestined result of an infinite number of former phenomena. This would be contradictory.

It is one thing to consider in our practical operations a first and last state, and it is another thing to conceive in the abstract a beginning and an end of things. We are at liberty to imagine the formation and destruction of a globe like our earth, because in this case we have a question of a succession of events which are real, determinable, divided for the sake of convenience in speech into the indefinite succession of cosmic accidents. But we may not speak of a beginning and an end in the absolute sense, and our thought itself refuses to admit a complete and sudden creation, a world extracted from nothingness. The words "beginning" and "end" are nothing more than symbols in this case. They represent an opposition the terms of which could not effectively limit the illimitable series of possible events. To any given magnitude you may always add another magnitude, and this is the only really clear expression of the primary fact of consciousness, under the pen of the philosopher as well as of the geometrician.

In short, Renouvier's idealism also evades the laws of reason. Moreover, he acknowledges that he is compelled, for want of evi-

dence, to consider God and liberty as objects of "rational belief." And his belief finds secret, may be unperceived, motives in the classical arguments of the naive realism which he congratulated himself upon having cast aside. This shows that we all remain in spite of ourselves, both idealists and realists at the same time!

An article published in *The Monist* (Oct. 1905), over the signature of Henry Bedinger Mitchell, presents this serious subject in a new light. Mr. Mitchell first attempts to evade the difficulty of conceiving as a whole, as a unity, that which by definition is infinite. The oneness of an assemblage depends chiefly on the law which connects its elements, namely, on psychological action; and such would be the modern definition of the finite and infinite founded on this consideration—putting aside details—that it would justify us in affirming the characteristic of infinity in man and in passing from mathematical infinity to that of the theologians.

Still this first step is difficult to take. It seems indeed that the faculty we have of forming series, should remain the primary fact and that the new definition justifying our hold on the "infinite" were forever begging the question.

Mr. Mitchell does not dispute this fact. He admits that "intellectual" consciousness is relative and that our mind acts necessarily in multiplicity. Accordingly he attempts a bolder step. He makes a rather subtle distinction between assemblage meaning multiplicity and assemblage meaning unity: cognition of the first according to him belongs to the mind, of the second, to the "heart."

This is the process, he tells us, which is used by mystics and artists. But then, with what kind of reality have we to deal? Mr. Mitchell now undertakes to make these two methods, of reason and of the heart, conform to each other. This is the third point of his thesis.

The method of comparison, he writes, is reputed the only scientific one. It is considered an act of intelligence, the method of direct perception being reckoned an arbitrary act of imagination. However great the action of reasoning may be in the comparison preceding any kind of generalization, the conception of a general law is not the result of pure reason. It is a creative act, comprising selection, desire and volition, but never logical compulsion. Through this act, something new passes from the *potential* world into the *actual*. Amongst the infinitely numerous explanations required by a series of phenomena, we choose the corresponding type between these phenomena and our concepts. And it is not this liberty of

selection which causes the instability of the explanatory hypothesis, but the inherent weakness of the scientific method. We can only substitute a unity which is known to ourselves, because created by ourselves, for an unknown but *intuitively felt* unity. If facts lead us to it, the "heart" helps along; it does not deceive us any more than our senses do.

Is it not exactly this point, I would ask Mr. Mitchell, which gives value in the first place to the hypothesis in science? It necessarily participates in our researches. Science always starts from some conjecture, and then branches off with other conjectures into philosophy. The important question is to estimate what the conjecture or hypothesis is worth, and consequently shall we not be led to admit that its quality depends on the facts on which it is based, on the more or less broad and solid foundation on which it rests?

This discussion which started with the relativity of knowledge, is finally centered in the difficult problem, the range of sentiment. And now, if I am not mistaken, we are led back, as far as the notion of God is concerned, to what may be called the "naïve" way of thinking in which, after all, the believer holds his ground most firmly, and from whence I have not the slightest intention of driving him.

There remains for us still (to reverse a famous adage) to decide whether sentiment is truly a *prima cognitio*, and whether there is anything in the heart of man to-day, save the predominance of passions, which has not first originated in his head. However, I am far from rejecting in all cases the significance of sentiment, or the consequences which may be deduced therefrom. I appreciate Mr. Mitchell's clever argumentation in spite of the slight reservations which I have felt it my duty to make, but I acknowledge that I wonder at the attitude of those who, imagining that they possess an intuitive idea of the absolute, of the infinite, yet say that they feel humiliated at not being able either to represent or understand it. Furthermore I can not believe that our inmost self should have the privilege of feeling this absoluteness, the phantom of which our intelligence tries in vain to grasp. Neither can I make up my mind to give words to a meaning mysterious to me, nor do I expect so high a metaphysical revelation for a mere psychological state.

Far from renouncing the notion of God, I, on the contrary, agree with Dr. Paul Carus in affirming that it stands for too great an effort of the human mind, as well as symbolizing truths which

are too important for the conduct of life, for us to be so rash as to abolish it.

I only wished to show in these few pages the flaw in certain demonstrations, and if I were called upon to give a concise formula, expressing my exact thought, I would say that God is the *logical expression* of the universe—"the moral law of nature," writes Dr. Carus, and let us not aspire to greater enlightenment.

LUCIEN ARRÉAT.

PARIS, FRANCE.

HUME VERSUS KANT.

To the Editor of The Monist.

In comment on some expositions in your *Primer of Philosophy* I wish to contribute the following observations on Kant's relation to Hume.

In answer to the question "Is Hume a skeptic?" I would decidedly say: No!

In order to justify my position it may be well to define the word skepticism.

Skepticism is the result of the dogmatical use of reason, without careful criticism (Kant).

Skepticism is that view according to which man can have only uncertain opinions, but no exact knowledge (Hume).

Skepticism is the result of reason throwing its light upon itself, thereby unweaving at night what it wove in the day, analogous to Penelope's texture (Rev. Rickaby). This last definition speaks for itself.

Radical skepticism flatly denies the fact that we can have a criterion of truth, yet the fundamental problem of all knowledge is this: Can we have such criteria? Indeed, if by constant truth is understood a judgment which has been for all time and will for ever remain recognized as valid, there is no truth. For every constant truth which has been heralded as such since the dawn of thought, has found many to deny it with abundant proof. But if there is no unconditional truth, we must assume as truth that which appears as such at this very moment, since the next moment may disprove it.

On the other hand, if we deny the objective measure of value